

OLD GUARDS TELL FASCINATING TALES OF SING SING'S ELITE

Men Whose Crimes Involved Millions of Dollars, Prisoners Who Were Artists, Notorious Murderers and Many Others Figure in Personal Experiences Related by Veteran Keepers

By EDWARD T. KAVANAUGH.

EVERYBODY who is anybody in New York crime or crookdom has seen or heard of Philip Shoemaker or Orson E. Helms of Sing Sing prison's official staff.

The two veteran attendants, who for three and four decades respectively looked after many famous criminals, just have been retired by the State on pensions.

Both tell fascinating stories of personal experiences with bank embezzlers, swindlers, counterfeiters, forgers and other "idle rich." Each played a prominent part in preparing notorious murderers to die in the electric chair. They also figured in the pursuit of fleeing convicts who broke out of prison by ingenious or dastardly escapes.

Shoemaker's dealings with the criminal class date back nearly twenty-eight years. He joined the prison service September 16, 1891, under former Warden Brown. Helms's reminiscences go back much further. Over forty-two years have elapsed since former Warden Clark appointed him on June 8, 1877.

Gifted with retentive memories, the two veteran prison attendants can tell you who's who among criminals. Each is able in a manner, they easily cultivated the acquaintance of their charges. Always an exquisite dresser, Helms has for years been known as the Beau Brummell of Sing Sing.

Shoemaker and Helms each had assignments of duty that gave them exceptional opportunities to mingle with the more notorious prisoners. For over nine years Shoemaker was sergeant of the guard. As such he toured all parts of the prison. He also supervised visits convicts had from relatives or cronies in the visiting room.

A Maligning Rothschild.

Helms for fifteen years was detailed to the hospital. As prosperous malefactors often got into that department, where prisoners are all fed better and nobody has to work, he met most of the prison elite there. Helms describes watching David Rothchild, president of the Federal Bank when he stole \$275,000, in the hospital until Superintendent of Prisons C. V. Collins charged that he was only feigning illness and put him to work.

Shoemaker tells of seeing Edwin O. Quigley, Wall Street banker and broker, who stole \$320,000 by forgeries, turning out the prison newspaper, *Star of Hope*, in the print shop.

Often performing relief duty in the deathhouse or hospital, the veterans guarded many murderers. Helms recalls how he saw three surgeons by a ruse trap William Ennis, the Brooklyn policeman who murdered his wife, in Gary, Indiana, when Ennis shamed paralytic to try to cheat the electric chair. Dr. George Smith, now of Central Islip hospital, and two other doctors commissioned by the Governor,

called at Sing Sing on December 13, 1903. Warden Johnson had Ennis transferred from the deathhouse to the hospital for the examination.

The doctors put Ennis on the operating table and then gave him a slight anesthetic. When he was coming through the ether they lifted the murderer off the table and let him drop onto the floor.

"Ennis forgot himself entirely," said Helms, "jumped up and walked away." His mind befogged, Ennis had forgotten to limp on his supposed paralyzed legs. The doctors informed the Governor Ennis was only feigning, and the next day he was put to death.

Shoemaker still tells of how he took her last meal to Mrs. Martha Place, who murdered her stepdaughter, Ida, in Brooklyn, the day before she was killed in the electric chair and how she seemed to relish the feast.

Governor Shaved by Murderer.

Some queer things have happened in Sing Sing. Shoemaker laughs about the night Gov. Roosevelt P. Flower received when an inmate barber convicted of murder was shaving him during his official visit to the prison on June 7, 1892. The barber was serving a life term. While working over his distinguished customer the murderer, holding the razor in his hand, suddenly stopped and asked the Governor if he would pardon him. The Governor, eyeing the razor, promised to look into the barber's case. The prisoner, seemingly satisfied, went on with his work. Gov. Flower, when he had alighted from the chair, described to Shoemaker and other prison attendances the unpleasant sensation the barber gave him. "When I saw that razor," said Gov. Flower, "I didn't dare to say 'No'."

Helms says the strangest aggression he ever saw visit Sing Sing was the Imperial High Chinese Commission. This was on February 10, 1906. Some one had told them the old legend about Sing Sing being a Chinese name. "Fang Quang, the secretary, asked that they be shown the execution chamber. 'They all sat in the electric chair,' said Helms, 'just for the novelty of it.'"

It was Helms who on May 8, 1893, slit the trousers worn by Carlyle Harris, famous murderer of Helen Fottis, so the electrodes could be applied to his legs when placed in the chair to be executed. Mrs. Harris, from a hill overlooking the prison, kept her eyes riveted on the flagpole on the roof of the warden's office. Finally a black flag hauled slowly up the flagpole flapped in the breeze. This was the signal to the curious mob gathered outside that the deadly electric contrivance had done its work and that Harris was dead.

It was the painful task of Shoemaker to escort the distracted mother of Harris into the prison mortuary to see the body of her dead son. "They've murdered you, Carlyle!" she shrieked; "they've murdered you!" The body was in the casket. On it Mrs. Harris had caused to be



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their dead bodies, each with a bullet hole, were fished out of the Hudson River. The prison officials decided that they had shot one another in a dispute in a rowboat as to whether to proceed across the river in the awful gale or turn back.

Pallister's body was taken to the south gate. Shoemaker took four prisoners from the jobbing shop and moved it to the execution chamber, where prison officials and Mrs. Pallister, the slayer's mother, identified it. Helms the morning of the death house "break" relieved Keeper Hulse and Murphy, whom the murderers had overpowered, disarmed and locked in the cells they vacated.

Shoemaker passed out the rifles to possess of prison employees to enable them to chase Big Bill Green, chronic jail breaker, and three other convicts when they assaulted Keeper Gormley and jumped into the Hudson River trying to escape in 1911. Dr. H. E. Mereness and Keeper McClelland, in a dory, were the first to overtake the fugitives. Dr. Mereness, with a rifle kept firing at the swimming convicts until they surrendered.

One Successful Getaway.

The oddest getaway Sing Sing ever had was that of George W. Carter. When he had finished a term in Blackwell's Island jail he went back there the next night and robbed Warden Louis Pillsbury's residence. For this he was sent to Sing Sing. He strangely vanished on June 1, 1911. Believing Carter was stowed away inside the walls Warden Durston made Helms and other keepers search the yard for fifteen consecutive nights. But no trace of him was found. Three years later Keeper Thomas Country discovered a caverned Carter had dug secretly under the shoe store back room. In it he had stayed until the warden had called off the search, evidently, and then got out at night over the river fence. When the dug-out was found in it was the food, water bottle, tea, tobacco and newspapers Carter had hidden behind him. Nobody ever has seen him since.

The boldest getaway in the prison history was that of James Blaine. Big Ben, the prison siren whistle which had just been installed to give alarms, roared out just before noon on May 13, 1897, the news that some one had escaped from Sing Sing.

It was Blaine. There was then an arched passageway under the middle of the cell block leading from the prison enclosure to the railroad tracks outside. Blaine, falling in behind a company of prisoners marching to lockstep around the yard, fell out when he reached the narrow way.

With a hammer he smashed open the padlock that locked the inner gate under the arch and passed through. Quickly throwing off his suit of stripes, beneath which he wore civilian clothes he stole somewhere, he ran to the city and hid. There he locked from the outside. With the blade of a large pair of shears, while keepers and convicts were moving about near by, he ripped the rear plate off the lock. Then he shot back the bolt. In another instant the big gate swung open. Blaine closed it behind him, hurried down the railroad tracks and made off. Before the alarm sounded he was riding safely away on a freight train. Shoemaker, Helms and others joined the search for him, but it was all for naught. Three months later Blaine was located serving a term for burglary in another prison. When he had expired his office there State Detective Jackson brought him back to his old haunts and made him finish the "bit" he had left behind him.

Many Have Tried Escape.

Some famous escapes have occurred in Sing Sing with which Shoemaker and Helms are thoroughly familiar. When Shoemaker reached the prison on the morning of August 22, 1892, he saw a body wedged between two bars of an upper window at the south end of the stone cell block. During the night Charles Vincent, a convict, had broken out of his cell. In a revolver battle with the keepers he was shot and killed while trying to squeeze through the small window. James Welch, an accomplice, managed to get outside, but was shot, wounded and recaptured before he had got far.

Thomas Pallister and Frank Koch, two murderers, escaped from the death house in a raging rain storm the night of April 20, 1893. It was supposed that they had made a clean getaway until several days afterward

time," replied the citizen, as he continued picking the flowers.

"I can see that you are one of those guys who thinks he is a privileged character," said the lieutenant. "You'll soon learn differently." A policeman was called by the lieutenant and told to go out and arrest the citizen. When the man was brought into the station and arraigned before the desk, he then spoke to the fact that he had made a serious mistake, and still more so when he was taken before a Magistrate and was charged of petty larceny.

Policeman Hammer does not allow any of the men to help themselves to the products of the garden. When they want a portion of vegetables to take home, they make known their wants to him, and he does the picking with his own hands. The men have learned to respect his wishes in the matter and they do not offend him by trying to help themselves.

Plays His Hobby.

"It has been said that very few men have a hobby, and I think the man who gave utterance to that phrase knew what he was talking about," was Policeman Hammer's reply to a query by a SUN reporter. "My hobby is gardening. I cannot begin to tell you how much pleasure I derive from looking after our little garden here. I have often wished I could have a home in the suburbs so I could gradually build up a garden, but I was not so fortunate. So when I came here I saw a chance to give full swing to my hobby."

"I love flowers, and if I do say it I think you will go a long way before you can find a more beautiful bed of art than I have raised. I have a first class capacity of this property some of the men were not even fond of flowers, but now they are as great over them as any home owner could be. Woo he unto the love of the most creative art of our civilization, to the flowers!"